

Every year, on the last Monday in May, our country comes together to reflect on the millions of brave men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our great nation. We also celebrate our armed services - the greatest in the world - and the moral imperative of our country to uphold the promises we have made to our veterans. As Americans, we must honor our soldiers, and in Congress, we have to go even further and fulfill our moral obligation with actions, not just words.

In Washington this year, Congress has shown its commitment to our veterans by making a number of critical investments in veterans' healthcare and benefits. Most recently, Congress passed a budget resolution that increases funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) by \$5.6 billion over 2009 levels. Additionally, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which was signed into law with my support, includes a \$1.4 billion increase in veterans' funding for maintenance at VA medical facilities and construction of extended care facilities for our veterans. These funding increases are great news for the over 75,000 veterans in North Florida who are eligible for VA medical care.

We also have a new generation of servicemembers returning from duty in the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To ensure these new veterans have access to higher education opportunities after returning from duty, Congress last year completed the largest expansion of the G.I. Bill since it was first introduced in 1944. This new G.I. Bill restores the assurance of a four year college education for our returning heroes, and at the start of this month, veterans were able to begin applying for this scholarship, which will help pay for tuition, books, and room and board. Many put their careers and education on hold to serve their country, and these education benefits will ensure that our veterans have full access to the knowledge needed to pursue the career of their choice.

At home, I am also working to ensure our veterans have accessible, quality healthcare. Last June, we officially opened the new Marianna VA Clinic in Jackson County, and I am proud of the quality of service that this clinic is offering to our communities. Over the past year, this clinic has provided primary and general care to area veterans, as well as a range of specialized services, including mental health screenings, wellness screenings, and wound care. The opening of this new clinic has been an exciting development for our community and has greatly increased the availability of quality VA medical care in Jackson County and surrounding counties.

Providing quality and accessible healthcare and benefits for our veterans is a cost of war and a duty of our communities and our nation. As one of a handful of members of Congress who have served in the military, I believe that the best way to memorialize this country's fallen heroes is to make good on the promises that we have made to our veterans. It is our moral duty to give our troops the tools they need to be successful on the battlefield, and it is just as important to ensure our veterans have access to proper benefits once they've returned home. We have made a lot of progress for our veterans in recent years, but our work isn't over. On this Memorial Day, I would like to sincerely thank our veterans and their families for their service to our country, and I am eager to continue to work in Washington and in North Florida to honor their sacrifice.